

THE AMERICAN LECTURE PLATFORM BEFORE 1930

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WHEN Dr. Josiah Holbrook established a lyceum in Millbury, Massachusetts, in 1826, he organized an institution that was destined to exert a tremendous influence not only upon the cause of free public education, which he espoused, but also upon American life in general and public address in particular. Here was the origin, for all practical purposes, of the American lecture platform. Here was the beginning of one of the foremost institutions associated with public address—an organization that during certain periods has included more than 150 commercial bureaus and management agencies, has had associated with it nearly every prominent American public speaker and a large number of lecturers from other countries, and has been the mainstay of the cultural life of thousands of communities for more than three-quarters of a century.

To students of American history, the lecture platform represents an important form of force, comparable to the press as an agency serving to unite sections of the nation, to enlighten millions of persons who would probably have had few other means—at least as efficient—until the turn of the century, and to focus attention upon the major issues of the day. To students of social trends, it represents, similarly, a significant and intriguing institution that has flourished in metropolitan circles and in rural areas, has appealed to virtually all types of Americans, and has passed through boom stages as well as those of comparative obscurity, only to repeat the cycle as the fluctuating course of American history has modified the habits and the customs of the people. To students of public address, the lecture platform represents

an important subject for study in that its very origin, its appeal, its speakers, and its influence constitute factors in the pattern of oral communication.

In this account we shall attempt briefly to survey the American lecture platform from its beginnings to approximately 1930.¹ We shall consider it from the point of view of three periods: (1) its beginnings to the Civil War; (2) its development from that time to 1900; (3) its evolution to 1930.

BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

Although the evidence is not clear as to the beginnings of American lecturing as a phase of public address, it is certain that the lecture platform was in existence long before the colonies won their independence. In the early days it probably consisted primarily of evangelists who traveled from one community to another, not only as preachers of the Gospel but as bearers of news. Their function was essentially that of the lecturer of later years—to tell of the latest events, to interpret news, and to stimulate discussions on topics of current interest. To many communities in the early days they constituted perhaps the only contact with the "outside world" except for that secured by personal correspondence.

Not until about 1826 did the lecture platform assume a well-defined status. Then it was that Dr. Holbrook, an early agitator for free public education, or-

¹ For an account of the lecture platform since 1930, see Kenneth G. Hance, "The Contemporary Lecture Platform," *QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF SPEECH*, XXX (February, 1944), pp. 41-47. Certain portions of the materials in this present article follow somewhat the sequence of our chapter on "The Later National Period, 1860-1930," in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, for which the McGraw-Hill Book Co. has given permission.

ganized the first lyceum, which proved to be the nucleus of a rapidly-growing institution. By 1828 there were approximately one hundred branches of the American lyceum; and by 1834 there were 3,000 town lyceums affiliated with county lyceums, which, in turn, were affiliated with state lyceums and with a national organization. For five years this vast network of lyceums flourished; but with the extension of free public education and the public's somewhat general acceptance of the principle espoused by Holbrook, the lyceum began to decline. Soon after 1839, therefore, the majority of the units had become inactive and the first manifestation of an American lecture platform had rather largely disappeared. The reason appears not to lie in any weakness of the lyceum system; rather in the fact that the lyceum was created for a specific purpose, and having accomplished that purpose, had no further immediate reason for being. Indeed, it may properly be observed that as a means of disseminating information and arguments, it was unusually successful.

FROM 1867 TO 1900

In 1867 the Associated Literary Societies was formed. It was an organization of 110 lyceums, and marked the beginning of lecturing as a "business." In fact, the Associated Literary Societies may properly be called the first commercial lecture bureau. This was a distinct innovation in the field of American public address, and had for its purpose the making of better Eastern lecturers available to the West. In the first year of its existence it booked thirty-five speakers. Later, in 1870, this group amalgamated with the American Literary Bureau of New York.

Meanwhile, James Clark Redpath, in collaboration with George L. Fall, founded the Boston Lyceum Bureau. Redpath was one of the most important men in

the lecture business, and, meeting a long-felt need throughout the United States, he was immediately successful in developing a central bureau that could supply lecturers to local lyceums. Just as Holbrook gave the lyceum its initial impetus, so did Redpath make it a big business, and thereby provide the means of expanding its scope and usefulness. Said one of Redpath's successors:

The bureau . . . has done more than any other agency to revive the lecture system, which was rapidly dying out all over the country. Since the establishment of this bureau, the number of lectures given in the United States has increased tenfold, chiefly under the impulse which it gave to the system. It has more than quadrupled the number of lectures that were given in New England when it was organized.²

Redpath managed most of the American lecturers from 1867 to 1875. Among those under his management were Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, John B. Gough, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Anna Dickinson, Henry Ward Beecher, and the English novelist, Charles Dickens. Putting lecturers on a commercial basis—usually a 10 per cent commission (present-day lecture bureaus charge 30, and even 40, per cent commissions)—Redpath helped some of his clients to clear handsome sums. John B. Gough, for example, cleared \$40,000 for the season of 1871-1872; Wendell Phillips averaged from \$250 to \$500 per lecture (often returning the fee to the sponsors); Henry Ward Beecher received as much as \$1,000 for a single lecture; and Charles Dickens received \$228,000 for his tour of 1867-1868.

Even at this point, however, the full development of the lecture platform had not been reached. The years 1875-1900 were destined to witness a phenomenal

² James B. Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius* (1900), p. 536.

growth in the number of lecture bureaus, in the number of registered lecturers, and in the demand for their talents. The reasons for this growth are observed largely in the circumstances of the times: the rise of the Machine Age with its era of comparatively greater prosperity, the spread of the temperance and the woman-suffrage movements, the growth of the city, an increasing interest in literary and scientific matters, and the improvement of transportation. Not to be overlooked also was the presence of James Burton Pond, a lecture-bureau manager of great ability, who secured the services of many of the renowned platform personages of his day and who so stimulated the business that the number of bureaus increased from one to one hundred.

To understand this period, we should consider three questions. What were the important developments in the lecture platform? How did this institution operate? Who were some of the prominent figures? The developments embrace four organizations: the *lyceum*, the *lecture bureau*, the *Chautauqua*, and the *free public lecture system*. By 1875 the old lyceum had virtually disappeared, although at least thirty of the old organizations did remain for some years. Taking its place was the new commercial lecture bureau with its practice of booking speakers and of providing means of stimulating public interest in the platform. In 1887 these bureaus inaugurated the practice of sending advance agents on the road to help build up interest in the coming lecturers and even to assist in the financing of a season's program. By the end of the century a half dozen of the largest bureaus were booking more than 3,000 lecture dates each. Added to this were the hundred other bureaus and many independent organizations who were also doing a large business.

The Chautauqua circuit was another important phase of this development,

and became both a complement and a competitor of the lecture business. Even though it may have been a factor in the later decline of the commercial lecture platform, it was a complementary force in the years 1875 to 1900 in that it helped to popularize the lecture business and to expand the demand for its talent. A second factor that was both a complement and a competitor was the system of free public lectures established in 1888 in New York City. Sponsored by the New York school board, this system grew until by 1898 there were forty-five centers, where in one year more than 2,000 lectures were given to approximately 1,200,000 persons.³

Nor was the business limited to speakers. It was broadened to include popular singers, players, and even opera companies. Among the actors so booked were Joseph Jefferson, William Winter, Sir Henry Irving, Charlotte Cushman, and Ellen Terry. Among the author-readers also booked by the Pond Bureau were Dr. A. Conan Doyle, Sir Edwin Arnold, Hall Caine, and George W. Cable.⁴

In its operation the commercial lecture-bureau system was interesting for its thoroughness and novelty. Customarily it sent out agents armed with sample photographs and circulars. These agents would round up a committee of enterprising, civic-minded citizens and persuade them to guarantee a fund to secure a course of lectures and entertainments.

They listen to the bureau agent's recommendations of "the greatest orator of the time, Mr. Breeze," and "the great traveller and adventurer, Mr. Push," . . . The course is made up, and contracts are signed before the agent leaves town. Then for six months

³ Anna L. Curtis, "A Brief History of the Lyceum," *Who's Who in the Lyceum*, A. Augustus Wright, ed. (Philadelphia, 1906), p. 31.

⁴ Pond, *op. cit.*, classifies the talent made available by the bureaus as orators; pulpit orators; women lecturers and singers; humorists; explorers, travelers, and war correspondents; actors and dramatic critics; literary lecturers; miscellaneous; author-readers and lecturers.

the course is being talked up. The bureau agent remains for a few days to assist the local canvassers in getting started, telling them who the celebrities are that are to make the town so famous by their visit, etc.

Over fifty such courses are already announced for the State of Michigan the coming autumn, August, 1900, over two hundred in the State of Illinois, nearly as many in Iowa, and so proportionally all over the country. More than \$6,000 a week is now being disbursed by bureaus to agents "selling courses."⁵

The talent was of two types: the lesser light or "simon-pure lecturer," and the "star" of the platform. The lesser light generally received from \$75 to \$300 per lecture. Usually he was a fairly well-known person who devoted the greatest part of his career to lecturing, and was managed by a bureau that paid a stipulated amount for each lecture plus traveling expenses. This was the type of lecturer that probably exerted the strongest influence upon the smaller communities, in particular. In the days when there were no radios and motion pictures, when newspapers and magazines were less widely circulated than they are today, the lecturer who reached the small cities and towns was not only a purveyor of information but probably a molders of opinion. It is estimated that lyceum lecturers alone reached an audience of 5,000,000 persons per year during the period from 1875-1900, and the Chautauqua and the free lecture bureaus reached an equally large number.

The real money-makers of the system, however, were usually not the "simon-pure lecturers" but the "stars" of the platform. They, as a rule, were the famous men and women of the pulpit, leaders in political and social movements, explorers, scientists, and authors who devoted only a small portion of their time to lecturing. They usually were booked for the large cities only, and ordinarily undertook but one tour per season.

These stars of the lecture platform were virtually a *Who's Who* of the period, and included the "great triumvirate of lecture kings," Gough, Beecher, and Phillips, as well as others whom we shall mention briefly. John B. Gough began his lecture career about 1842 and continued to the time of his death in 1886. He delivered more than 9,600 addresses before an estimated 9,000,000 hearers. His popularity was tremendous: and in the years from 1874 to 1886 he frequently received from \$500 to \$1,000 per lecture. Henry Ward Beecher was also one of the great platform attractions. In the years 1875 to 1887, during which he was connected with the Pond Bureau, he delivered 1,261 lectures in every state and territory in the Union except Arizona and New Mexico, and covered approximately 300,000 miles "by every conceivable mode of travel, in special Pullman cars, the regular passenger trains, mixed trains, freight trains, on steamboats and rowboats, by stage and on the backs of mules."

Likewise, Wendell Phillips was a platform star for 40 years, and in at least two respects was distinctive among the lecturers of his period: first, in the extent of his repertoire; and, second, in his attitude toward fees. His prepared lectures were on such subjects as travel, science, current politics, reform, labor, abolition of slavery, education, biography, religion, and foreign affairs. His attitude toward finances was different from that of many bureaus and of many other lecturers. He did not earn so much money from his lecturing as he might have made, for he never permitted sponsors or committees to lose money if he knew it. "In case of bad weather, or a disappointment of any kind . . . he would invariably insist that he receive only an equitable portion of the profits."⁶

Among the pupil orators who ap-

⁵ Pond, *op. cit.*, pp. 300-301.

⁶ Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

peared on the lecture platform were, in addition to Beecher, such men as Lyman Abbott, Newell Dwight Hillis, T. DeWitt Talmage, and two English preachers, Joseph Parker and S. Reynolds Hole, who were on a lecture tour in the United States during the season 1894-1895.

Women too, were prominent on the lecture platform. They came into prominence during the years 1875-1900 both as lecturers in the traditional sense and as spokesmen for temperance and woman suffrage. Mrs. Ann Elizabeth Young, the first lecturer booked by the Pond Bureau, began her career in 1873 in New England and other Eastern states, lecturing "nightly to as large audiences as were being drawn by the most popular lecturers of the period. . . . At the end of the season she had earned over \$20,000."

Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw constituted one of the most noted teams in the history of the American platform. In addition to doing extensive speaking under other auspices and on other subjects, they joined forces in 1882 in order to promote the cause of woman suffrage. From New York to California and from West Virginia to South Dakota they campaigned and crusaded, sometimes as independent speakers and at other times under the auspices of lecture bureaus. Of their activities on behalf of woman suffrage, Dr. Shaw says: "In 1890, '92, and '93 we again worked in Kansas and in South Dakota with such indefatigable and brilliant speakers as Mrs. Catt, Mrs. Laura Johns of Kansas, Mrs. Julia Nelson, Henry D. Blackwell, Dr. Helen V. Putnam of Dakota, Mrs. Emma Smith DeVoe, Rev. Olympia Brown of Wisconsin, and Dr. Mary Seymour Howell of New York."⁷ On behalf of the temperance movement they also campaigned and lectured during the years 1882 to 1893 in Kansas, Ohio, New York,

West Virginia, South Dakota, Idaho, Utah, California, and Washington.

Other prominent women lecturers included Julia Ward Howe, who for 30 years spoke in all parts of the United States, Anna E. Dickinson, and Mary A. Livermore. Anna E. Dickinson was said to be so popular that "only Gough and Beecher rivalled her as a lyceum favorite"; and Mrs. Livermore matched Phillips in the scope of her repertoire, which included woman suffrage, biography, history, politics, religion, and reform. The first woman to be listed by the Redpath Bureau, Mrs. Livermore lectured on an average of 100 times a year in the lyceum in addition to more than a thousand times on temperance and a like number of times on woman suffrage.

THE EVOLUTION TO 1930

After 35 years of phenomenal development, the commercial lecture platform entered another distinct phase about the turn of the century. Although many lecture bureaus did, of course, continue to exist after 1900, the trend was toward the Chautauqua, the free public-lecture system, the forum, and the University Extension movement, as well as toward such competing institutions as the press and the theatre. During the years from 1920 to 1930, in particular, the development of the radio, the motion picture, and improved transportation from smaller communities to the city served further to curtail, in a comparative sense, the scope of the organized lecture program.

The Chautauqua attracted a great part of the lecturing talent. For example, William Jennings Bryan, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. LaFollette, James Bryce, and William Allen White appeared with Chautauqua rather than with the regular lyceum bureaus.⁸

⁷ Anna Howard Shaw, *The Story of a Pioneer* (New York, 1929), pp. 242-243.

⁸ Upton Close, "The Lecture Business," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XXI (1940); p. 15.

Another factor in the evolution of the lecture platform in the years following 1900 was the University Extension movement. In 1890 when Provost Pepper, of the University of Pennsylvania, brought from England the idea of an extension service, he inaugurated a movement in adult education that quickly spread to a number of leading institutions, and included eventually nearly every state university in America. This movement, which now has units in more than fifty centers, established its own lecture courses and in other ways paralleled the work of the commercial lecture bureaus, and soon was one of the means of displacing them in many communities.

The popularity of the lecture platform was also affected by the increasing availability of newspapers and magazines, and by the development of the opera house with the traveling operatic and theatrical companies on tour. Whereas magazines in 1875, for example, were of limited circulation, in 1900 they had enormously increased. In 1875 the machinery for printing 1,000 newspapers per hour was exceptional; by 1900, however, 100,000 papers could be printed in the same time. In 1885 there were approximately eighty traveling operatic and theatrical combinations on the road, whereas in 1900 there were nearly fifteen hundred going from town to town on one-night stands. In cities like New Haven, Hartford, Springfield, and Worcester, for instance, theatres booked their time solid with these groups from August to May, leaving little opportunity for the lecture course to attract as large a following as formerly.

After 1900, also, the emphasis changed in many instances to the forum and the motion picture, both of which furnished, in the majority of instances, either greater variety or more accessible entertainment. The forum movement, with a somewhat different emphasis and type

of program, came into prominence after 1900. A few representative institutions were Ford Hall, Boston (1908); Old South Forum, Boston (1915); Chicago Forum (1925); Town Hall, New York (1921, established originally as The League for Political Education in 1894); Sinai Temple Forum, Chicago (1914); Commonwealth Club of California (1912). Finally, came the radio, which instituted such features as America's Town Meeting of the Air (in conjunction with Town Hall) and similar forum programs made available to all persons having access to receiving sets.

The entertainment field, both in the radio and in the motion picture, was also an increasingly important competitor of the lecture platform. For example, the motion picture industry in 1924 embraced 17,836 theatres and is said to have attracted 20 per cent of the population each day and 68.2 per cent more or less regularly.⁹

In the third decade of the twentieth century the situation was, therefore, essentially this: Many lecture bureaus were doing an extensive business, many lecturers were on the road, and perhaps even more persons were attending lectures than ever before, but, comparatively, the lecture platform did not occupy the distinctive position that it had in 1885. Even though it had assumed the proportions of a "big business" and attracted many of the leading platform personages, it had largely disappeared from the smaller communities, and in the larger cities it was rivaled by such other agencies of education and entertainment as the motion picture. The typical city, for instance, might have a number of motion-picture theatres drawing large crowds each day, whereas it would have one or two lecture courses offering perhaps fortnightly programs during the fall and winter season. Be that as it may,

⁹ *World Almanac*, 1925, p. 539.

the lecture platform was an important medium of public address in America to 1930; and it contributed much to the life of the nation. "From it [lecturing] came the main stimulus to American adult education, reading courses, book clubs,

correspondence schools, the immense business-book publishing business. It has been the firing line of our anti-slavery, temperance, woman's rights, and anti-narcotics crusades."¹⁰

¹⁰ Close, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

THOMAS HART BENTON: AN EVALUATION

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AMONG the men who exerted great political influence in the pre-Civil War period, Thomas Hart Benton deserves a prominent place. Although few people other than students of history recognize his name, his record of service in the Senate reveals that he was responsible for more sound legislation than Webster and Clay combined. Such a man with such a period of service invites further study and evaluation in order to describe more clearly the type of person he was, to determine the precepts upon which he based his thinking, and to define the ultimate goals for which he struggled.

Benton was born in Orange County, near Hillsborough, North Carolina, on March 14, 1782. His father was a lawyer of recognized ability, and his mother was a descendant of the distinguished Hart family of Virginia. In early life, at his parents' encouragement, Benton read extensively in his father's library, and later entered the University of North Carolina. He was never able to finish his course because in 1798 the family moved to a 3,000 acre tract of land in Tennessee. Here, besides aiding in the management of the plantation, he became the local schoolmaster for a year and began the study of law. In 1806 he was admitted to the bar and, in a few years, was elected to the upper house of the General Assembly of the state. He remained a mem-

ber of the Tennessee legislature for only one term.

With the outbreak of the war in 1812 Benton enlisted under Andrew Jackson, the major-general of the Tennessee militia, and was appointed his aide-de-camp. Subsequently he was active in raising volunteers to serve in the militia, and received the commission of lieutenant-colonel. In 1815, after being honorably discharged from the army, he went to St. Louis and began again the practice of law. Within a few years he was prosperously established. His early public life in the new state was marked by his appointment to the First Board of School Trustees in St. Louis in 1817, by his editorship of the *St. Louis Enquirer*¹ and, finally, by his election to the United States Senate in 1820.

Benton's activities up to 1820 had been very much what one would expect from a frontier lawyer. His education had been largely a matter of self-direction, and circumstances had made it necessary for him to engage in different pursuits. In all of them we detect a restless energy and a struggle for a new order. This struggle was primarily a reflection of the frontier spirit, a spirit of belligerency and a largeness of outlook that demanded, if not control, at least a dominant voice. Since Benton's career was characterized

¹ An incomplete volume of the *St. Louis Enquirer*, beginning September 1, 1819, and ending August 30, 1820, is in the Missouri Historical Library, St. Louis.

